Private Lives ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE C-5

WASHINGTON POST
11 June 1985

In Pursuit of Secrets

By Nancy Hathaway

One of the rituals of beginning friendship is the exchange of secrets. For some, this is a difficult step, seldom undertaken. For others, it is a cathartic, thrilling event, and once the process has begun, revelations tumble out one after the other.

The mere fact that we classify a particular piece of information as secret means that it matters to us.

The content is not crucial. What is important is simply this: Secrets have power. They have power when we don't tell them, and they have power when we do. They are charged.

"Everyone has secrets that don't get revealed to anyone," says Dr. Paul Fox, a Los Angeles family psychiatrist. Some of those are serious heavy-duty secrets—the kind that can shape entire lives, because the weight they carry is more than symbolic.

Consider the woman with three children who has never told her husband—or anyone else—that she was the victim of incest. Or the homosexual who has been "in the closet" for years. Or the new employee who recently spent several months in a mental institution and lied about it on his job application.

But if these heavy-duty secrets are revealed, consider the aftermath—as in the recent revelations of Barbara Walker, former wife of alleged spy John Walker. According to published reports, she suspected for some time that her ex-husband may have been selling secrets to the Russians. When she did inform the FBI, her accusations led not only to the arrest of John Walker, but also four others, including her son Michael. Also, the alleged selling of the secrets to a foreign government may have seriously compromised national security.

Most of us, however, carry much smaller secrets; we may not even think of them as secrets. We just never talk about them. Ever. To anybody. These secrets include fantasies, wishes, feelings, sensations and memories—events that can range all the way from the classically Freudian "primal scene"—seeing our parents make love—to what might appear to be ordinary, totally forgettable incidents of childhood play. It doesn't matter how innocent or how minor they look now. When we were children, they didn't feel unimportant, and they didn't seem innocent either—which is one reason we kept them secret.

"A child's discovery that he alone knows something can come as a relief and a great joy," writes philosopher Sissela Bok in *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation.* "To realize that one has the power to remain silent is linked to the understanding that one can exert some control over events—that one need not be entirely transparent, entirely predictable."

By its very existence, a secret distinguishes its bearer. In this way, the subject matter is irrelevant. But in another way, it is precisely the content that matters most, and in this (as in so many other areas), we are fairly predictable. Research findings from the University of Michigan and psychological surveys taken in Holland point to the same conclusion. We keep our mouths shut about two major areas: sex and failure.

There are, of course, infinite variations on these themes. Today we are more open about discussing sex than we once were, but, says psychiatrist and UCLA assistant clinical professor Carole Lieberman, M.D., "sex is still a secret. At its core, there's a really secretive element." We feel relatively free to discuss what we did; how we truly felt about it is another matter.

As for failure, it can render us practically inarticulate. Almost every expression of it silences us; we keep quiet about phobias, weaknesses, humiliations and anything else we suspect might diminish us. And when it comes to sexual failure and rejections, we just aren't talking.

We keep quiet not just about failure per se but also about anything that may cause us to reflect upon it. Chief among this is money. A survey conducted by Psychology Today magazine suggests that most of us don't discuss finances with anyone other than our spouses. Only 44 percent of those who answered the survey would talk about their financial successes with friends and relatives; only a third would discuss financial failures. And the more money we have, the less likely we are to talk about it. It is a subject that fills us with anxiety, and our reactions to it can seem contradictory. We want more of it, yet we distrust it and those who have it.

Love has its own secrets—the ones we share with one another, and the ones we create together. Among these are the light, playful secrets of love: the secret names, the secret games, the secret inexplicable feelings. These secrets strengthen the tie at the same time as they increase the distance from the rest of the world. Ideally, this creates strength and a certain kind of autonomy.

At other times, however, keeping the secret can have very negative repercussions. A secret can form a shell between us and the rest of the world. While it increases the intimacy among those who know the secret, it also divides us from everyone else. Within some families, there are things that you're not allowed to discuss—either inside the family or out. This decision is conveyed by the total silence that descends when the subject is broached. Soon it is never even referred to, as if no one ever noticed that Dad gets falling-down drunk or that Mother and Father are always screaming at each other behind closed doors. "It becomes apparent that there are things not to be talked about, and that's a damaging thing for all concerned," Fox explains. "When a secret becomes a distortion of reality, it's a problem." That's one reason we need to grow beyond the family.

One way to move into the new world is to reveal our secrets. For some, this is extraordinarily difficult. "If the style of the family is to maintain a lot of secrets, this could lead to the children growing up and feeling very uncomfortable about sharing themselves—and especially sharing anything that might not appear really positive," comments Los Angeles psychiatrist Dr. Leslie P. Lipson.

Secrets that remain hidden grow in importance. When people have been

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harboring a secret for a long time, Lipson says, "their own view of that secret, their internal representation, becomes very powerful compared to what an outside, objective person might think of it."

"The key is to be able to pick the right people to share our inner secrets with," says Lieberman. "Sometimes people don't have many friends, and they want them so badly they pick the wrong people in hopes of turning them into friends." Perhaps our would-be confidants spread our secrets around. Or maybe they react in a neutral, noncritical way and pass out of our lives rather quickly. "In that situation, a person sometimes feels incredibly exposed and foolish," Lipson states. By sharing our secrets indiscriminately, we end up feeling disappointed or betrayed.

"Exchanging secrets is a kind of ritualized courting that goes on between two people," says Lieberman. It is a necessary step on the road to a relationship. Each person draws from us a new combination of secrets, for we don't always share the same secrets with everyone. But on some significant level, the sharing must take place if the relationship is to grow. "You can't really be close to people unless you share some secrets, because that's part of what builds up the trust," says Lieberman.

Discussing other people's secrets offers a way to gauge one's own reaction to them, by providing a social context and an opportunity to articulate. Hearing secrets illuminates the inadequacy of one's previous conception of the world. We tell other people's secrets because we believe it will increase intimacy with the person we tell.

We tell because we hope it will confer prestige; we will show ourselves to be in the know, and our status will rise accordingly. We tell to demonstrate our power. And we tell because we cannot resist the lure of many happy hours of discussion and analysis.

In many fields, the ability to be self-contained, to keep secrets, is considered essential—but even then it is not necessarily assumed. Consequently, people in business and industry are often asked to sign agreements that specifically forbid divulging secrets about such things as new products and marketing strategies.

As difficult as it may be to keep secrets about new manufacturing techniques or advertising campaigns, it can be even harder to keep secrets about personnel. The executive secretary who knows long before anyone else that a company takeover is in the works and that several staff members are about to become unemployed carries a different burden because she is forced to prioritize her loyalties. Corporate duties may conflict with personal feelings. The question of values cannot be overlooked, for as soon as secrecy becomes an issue, moral considerations arise.

When we want to discuss a deeply personal secret, we usually choose someone we love. But sometimes knowing what we know about human nature and the grapevine, we may break outside of our usual circle and look elsewhere. Perhaps we seek a professional—a doctor, psychiatrist, priest or rabbi. We tell them, the secret is diffused, we feel a lot better, and we go about our lives.

But what about the people we tell? "I suppose in the first year there was an eagerness to come home and talk about it," says one psychiatrist. "But when you've encountered the unusual situation for the 45th time . . ."

Medical and psychiatric secrets are always personal, even when they are small. A patient confides to her doctor that her arthritis is acting up and it makes sex painful and she is afraid to tell her husband. "Medical secrets are trivial on the one hand and contain so much despair on the other," says physician Elliot Abravanel. "People need comfort, and it's sometimes so unavailable. The difficulty for the doctor is not the burden of keeping the secret. It's the burden of knowing other people's dreams."

But what happens when the secret revealed is an unusual one? What happens when the patient is extremely famous and the secret is very interesting? "Strength forms around the secret, and one realizes that one can function fully and still have a lot inside that carries energy. That's part of it," explains Abravanel. "The other part is you're dying to tell. But it's intrinsic to the contract that an important confidence only go one way. The consequences of betrayal are so devastating and the value of betrayal—what you get out of it—so trivial, that there's no inclination to tell."

The issue of confidentiality is easily clouded, however, especially when the medical facts become significant to others. If the president has a stroke, if a candidate's cholesterol level is dangerously high, the confidentiality must be questioned. What is a physician's responsibility when facts such as these come to light? The greater necessity of public knowledge may outweigh the professional assumption of confidentiality.

Confidentiality is perhaps more of an issue with psychiatry than with any other area. "The professionals that we impose the highest level of secrecy on are the therapists," says Los Angeles social worker Maggie McGee. "I think it has something to do with the attitudes the general public has about the contents of psychotherapy. There's a stigma on psychological treatment. Many clients don't even tell anyone they're in therapy."

The entire arena is ringed with embarrassment and secrecy. When therapists do discuss cases, they change or omit certain aspects in order to assure anonymity. And therapists tend to rely on formal networks for discussion—seminars, study groups, conferences, journals.

Under certain circumstances, however, a psychiatrist must reveal what a patient has confided, no matter how deeply personal that confession might have been. Ever since 1969, when a particularly gruesome case brought these issues to public awareness, the law has required it. The case took place in California, where a student had confided to his therapist that he wanted to murder his girlfriend, Tatinan Tarasoff. Believing it to be more than just an idle daydream, the therapist notified the police, who talked to the young man. The matter was dropped along with the therapy. Two months went by. Then one day the student went to Tarasoff's home and killed her.

The girl's parents sued everyone concerned for failing to warn either them or their daughter that she was in danger. The California Supreme Court ruled that, indeed, the potential victim should have been warned. Referring to the whole question of confidentiality, the court wrote, "The privilege ends when the public peril begins."

But the question remains: "When do you decide that someone is going to harm someone else?" says Lieberman. "With many psychotic patients who are very angry, who have vivid fantasies and talk about killing, it's so fuzzy you really can't predict."

Psychiatrists have wrestled with these considerations, as have Catholic theologians, regarding the confidentiality of the confessional. The general agreement is that there comes a point

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at which confidentiality must bow before society, where morality takes precedence over therapy. But where exactly that point is is not a simple matter to determine.

The moral overtones of secrecy, examined in detail by Sissela Bok in her book *Secrets*, do not begin only at the moment when human life is in danger. Daniel Ellsberg, who sent the Pentagon Papers to The New York Times, was accused of treason by some for spilling military secrets and applauded by many others for a higher patriotism. Ellsberg is somewhat of a legend in the literature of secrecy, for the drama surrounding him illuminates many issues. When political concerns center on the question of secrecy, moral issues are at stake. Secrecy on behalf of national security, for example, is revered by some as a most important principle, necessary for our freedom, while many others see it as a threat to our civil liberties, a mask used to cover the sometimes tyrannical blunders of government. The military and the CIA have been accused of abusing the privilege of secrecy; the press has been accused of not respecting the need for secrecy and of invading people's privacy.

Privacy and secrecy are, of course, not the same thing, although they are often equated. "A private garden need not be a secret garden; a private life is rarely a secret life," Bok writes. As a rule, we associate an open society with individual privacy and an absence of official secrecy; conversely, official secrecy and an absence of individual privacy are linked with an authoritarian climate. "Secrecy and a free, democratic government don't mix," Harry Truman once said. Which is not to say, however, that the issues are always clear. Whose desire matters more: adopted children who want to learn the identity of their birth parents, or the parents, who gave up the children and expected the records to be sealed? How can we distinguish between what ought to remain hidden and what needs to be known?

"Secrecy may accompany the most innocent as well as the most lethal acts," writes Bok. "It is needed for human survival, yet it enhances every form of abuse."

This is why, politically, we distrust secrecy. It's the difference between the police and the secret police; whatever police abuses there might be, the role of "secret police" sounds considerably more ominous.

We are, then, of mixed minds about secrets, because we wish to be set apart and we wish to be joined together; so sometimes we revel in having secrets, and sometimes we yearn to tell secrets, and sometimes we itch to hear secrets.

When we reveal our secrets we open ourselves up to parts of us that are most hidden, most idiosyncratic, we reveal our deepest humanity and our truest self.